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ABSTRACT

A sequential series of writing assignments designed and tested for a tenth grade writing workshop through the cooperative efforts of college and technical high school English teachers is discussed in this paper. Twelve assignments and their underlying educational theories are explained. The first six assignments are described as progressive and cumulative, with six specific learning objectives: (1) describe an object, (2) describe a place, (3) describe a person, (4) tell something that happened to you, (5) tell about something you saw happen, and (6) describe a neighborhood that you know well. Assignments 7 through 12 are offered for teachers to choose from at random: (7) explain how to do something; (8) explain how something works; (9) explain why you do or did something; (10) select a picture and describe what you see and what you think about it; (11) select a passage from a book, read it through, and explain what you read and what you think about it; and (12) persuade someone to agree with what you think about something. Successful strategies that have helped students who were unable to find a subject are also suggested. (AEA)

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The Writing Workshop: A Course Outline

In the summer of 1975, five teachers from the English Department at Springfield Technical High School and a consultant from the University of Massachusetts designed and tested a course outline for a tenth grade writing workshop. Attached to our project were two tenth grade English classes. We agreed upon an initial assignment, gave it to our sixty students, worked with them in a 100-minute writing workshop, and then met after class for another 100 minutes to analyze the results, pinpoint common problems, and design strategies for the next day's work. At the end of the six-week summer session, we found that we have given twelve assignments and that we had dealt with the first ten of these in adequate depth. Because each student moved at his or her own pace, and because all students did not finish all twelve assingments, our data on the later assignments becomes progressively less complete.

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We have designed and tested a series of six assignments that is both progressive and cumulative. We have designed and tested a second set of six assignments that follows the first set, but this second set has no necessary sequence. The teacher should have each student complete Assignments 1-6 in sequence. Then the student can move on to any of the six subsequent assignments.

We have listed objectives for the first six assignments. We suggest that a student be kept at a particular assignment until its objectives have been met in some degree. If, for example, the writer has not learned to observe closely and accurately in assignment 1, the writer cannot possibly do an adequate job on subsequent assignments. The objectives accumulate; none is ever completed. The teacher should check each piece of writing for concreteness, organization, point of view, correctness, accuracy--in that order.

We have not listed objectives for Assignments 7-12, because the problems encountered by the writer in these assignments are difficult to predict. Furthermore, the skills mastered in 1-6 will have to be mastered anew in 7-12 as, for example, problems of organization and point of view multiply and become more complex. The student encountered the problem of organizing a description of a place in Assignment 2; in 10 he or she will be organizing the several aspects of his response to a photograph. In both problems the problem is "how to organize?" but clearly in 10 the bar has been set higher than it was in 2.

In all these assignments, when a student has done something well (completed an objective) we should tell the student, and perhaps use the

vocabularly of English Composition in so doing, even if we have not done so in helping the student solve the original problem. If the writer developed an idea well, we should say that--and in those words. We should also tell the writer that this skill will be used in subsequent assignments--that, in fact, the writer should look for opportunities to use it. It will be a tool in the workshop, available to the writer should it be needed.

COURSE OUTLINE

Assignment 1: "Describe an object."

Objectives: 1. To teach close observation;

2. To acquaint students with the steps in the writing process: list-making, organizing, first draft writing, revising.

In this first assignment, the teacher-editor will closely supervise the student writer through each step of the writing process. As the writer progresses through the series of writing assignments, the teacher-editor will intervene later in the process, waiting until the writer's ideas have begun to crystallize in the first draft. In this initial assignment, however, the teacher should insist upon a list of details that is sufficiently full and sufficiently specific. The list must clearly distinguish the individiual from the species--e.g. Tom's Eberhard Faber #2 pencil from other Eberhard Faber #2's in the room.

The object described should be present in the classroom, available simultaneously to the teacher and the student. Only in this way will the teacher be able to demonstrate to the student that there is more to be seen, more to be observed. In later description assignments the person

or place being described will be known only to the student, and it will be more difficult for the teacher to demonstrate that there is more than the writer observed at first. So the object should be in the classroom, and it must be there every day until Assignment 1 has been completed. Rings, pens or pencils, American flags on the wall, chairs--these objects most immediately present themselves to students as suitable objects. If the teacher wants to vary his or her own reading, the teacher might bring in small objects and offer them to the class, remembering to collect them at the end of each period.

Assignment 2: "Describe a place."

Objectives: Those of Assignment 1 and

1. Spatial ordering of objects that comprise "place";
2. Writer's selection of appropriate vantage point.

"Place" is a complex of objects, and in moving from one object to many objects we ask the student to solve only one new problem: how to order the chaos.

This assignment seems brief and therefore perhaps casual, but the wording was carefully thought through and, we think, worth trying again. We considered using the words scene and setting instead of place. We rejected setting because it refers to elements of secondary importance--the heath, for instance, that Lear rages in front of. We rejected scene because we thought that this would do too much of the writer's work for the writer. Scene defines the writer's relationship to the subject--the writer is in something like a theater, looking from a fixed point at a

group of objects 10-75 feet away and slightly below, these objects grouped under something like a proscenium arch. If we ask the writers to describe a scene, we reasoned, we will have solved for the writers a problem that they should begin to solve for themselves--specifically, the selection of an appropriate vantage point.

The results were mixed. Some writers solved the problem of vantage point and learned from their success; several chose moving points of view and had to be redirected; others had to be given a particular point of view after it became apparent in their first and second drafts that they would not find one on their own. The moving point of view seems at first attractive, but it also seems to create more problems than it solves. In short, some succeeded, some failed and learned; and others failed until they were re-directed by the teacher. We feel that the assignment should stand as worded, "Describe a place." Students who demonstrate that they need help in choosing a vantage point should be helped, but not until they have completed the first draft.

We suggest that in this assignment, as well as in Assignment 1 (describe an object) the teacher make no initial attempt to control the balance of subjective and objective response. Through the writing of the first draft, the writer should be allowed to find his or her best way. We can expect a range of approaches extending from the primarily subjective to the primarily objective--from the scream of hatred to the dispassionate list. Either has been successful. The degree of objectivity/subjectivity will depend upon the writer's response to the object, the place, or the person.

We should not create limits where limits are not necessary. After the first draft has been completed, we have found that we can intervene constructively and point out to the writer what the writer has done.

Assignment 3: "Describe a person."

Objectives: Those of assignments 1 and 2, and

1. The writer's control of a complex response to a complex entity.

With the 'person' assignment it becomes finally too difficult to separate the term point of view into vantage point and writer's attitude. Even the word attitude can suggest both spatial and emotional relationships. And since Heisenberg it has become impossible to see the universe as an object to be observed. The universe has become ambiguous, in part created by our observation of it, and the words objective and subjective no longer denote pure states but tendencies, if indeed they mean anything at all. We therefore suggest that the phrase point of view be used in its full ambiguity, to refer either to physical or attitudinal perspectives, or to both simultaneously. The ambiquity of the word reflects the ambiguity of the universe.

At this point in the sequence of assignments, we can begin to expect more volume from the writers. Perhaps at this point we should, where appropriate, suggest that a person is not necessarily one page long.

Some students found Assignment 3 too difficult, and they simply broke down.

It may be that in moving from place to person, we move too far too fast for some; it may be that the assignment asks for more than the writer

is willing to reveal to the teacher this early in the year. Whatever the reason, some students found it impossible to write on the person assignment until they had written a description of a pet. All students should do the person assignment eventually, but those who find themselves unable to do it after the place assignment might try the pet description first.

Assignment 4: "Tell us about something that happened to you."

Objectives: Those of previous assignments, and

1. Coordination and combination of skills learned in Assignments 1-3 in a coherent, internally consistent narrative structure;
2. The ability to organize events in time.

We chose the wording here (tell us) to solve the problems of point of view and audience for the student. We have created the narrative situation, and this assignment should therefore move easily and rapidly.

For some students, the assignment moved too easily and rapidly, and they tossed off a plot-summary narrative that seemed to them to fulfill the assignment. Good narrative is more than plot, however; it contains descriptions of persons, places, and/or objects. Assignments 4 and 5 build upon Assignments 1, 2, and 3, and the students' narratives should include where appropriate descriptions of persons, places, and/or objects. In Assignments 4 and 5, the teacher should insist upon some detailed and effective description. If a student does not at first include sufficient description to bring life to the events, he or she should be required to describe. We intend the assignments to accumulate, not simply exist in a sequence.

Assignment 5: "Tell us about something you saw happen,"

Objectives: All of the above, and

1. To refine the writer's sense of point of view. In Assignment 2, we asked the writer to select and maintain an appropriate vantage point. Here, as a dramatized observer, the writer will have to deal with emotional, as well as spatial perspective.

In this assignment, the writer becomes an observer, standing somewhere outside the action, emotionally involved to some degree but physically distant. In the draft stages we should stress selection of point of view. We may get dramatized observers of all sorts and 'absent' or omniscient observers--and we should let the writers choose their own point of view. When the writer has completed the first draft, we can insist that the point of view be handled in an appropriate manner. We should not mention the subject of point of view before the completion of the first draft, although if the writer brings it up we should respond. And when the writer has reached the draft stage we should not insist on a single and consistent degree of observer involvement. Both the observer and involvement in the action may brighten and fade in the writing, as they do in life.

Narrative assignments and the list. It seems that some writers can complete satisfactory narratives without making lists. If the writer <u>can</u> skip the list and produce a substantial narrative, we should let him or her do so. And when we do let the writer skip the list in Assignments 4 and/or 5, we create problems for ourselves an Assignment 6, which the writer cannot complete without proceeding through all the steps. The writer should be forewarned of this before undertaking Assignment 6.

Assignment 6: "Describe a neighborhood, one that you know well. As you tell us about your neighborhood, you will be describing objects, places, and people, and telling us about things that happen to you in the neighborhood--combining all the kinds of writing we've been doing this semester. A neighborhood is a physical and a social being. It is streets and buildings and trees and people and events."

Objectives:

1. To put together what we've done already (description, narration) in an extended and complicated structure; and
2. To cause the writer to select from a still larger pool of materials those details that are meaningful to the writer. This is an extention of Objective I in the third assignment, "control of a complex subject." In Assignment 6 the writer will probably have too much material and will have to select.

The assignment as it is worded produced both good and bad writing. Some writers wrote rapidly and well; some saw the assignment as prescriptive and felt that they had to include descriptions of objects, places, and people and things that happened to them and things that they had seen happen.

Problem: the more we say in an assignment, the more we help and the more we prescribe. One writer saw his neighborhood primarily in terms of trees. Clearly this writer should not be asked to list buildings and people and streets and so on. Another writer listed streets and houses and neighbors and trees dutifully and soporifically. In talking with her she told us that she spent all her time at the lake at the end of her street -- and she had just mentioned this lake as one item on her long list. She had to put aside what she had done and write about what was important to her in that neighborhood, as distinct from what she

thought was important to us. The lake became a page, and the new material was combined with the old in a fine piece of writing.

Despite the problems, we suggest that the assignment's wording be retained. As worded, it produced more good writing than bad, and the problems it posed for the writers were problems they could profitably encounter at this stage in their development.

A number of students wrote fine essays that were close to reminiscence. We can't make these happen; when they do happen, we can simply be grateful. These were, in a sense, poorly organized, but their success as "voice" writing depended upon their idiosyncratic organization. If a piece is fun to read, it is good.

In this assignment, perhaps to a greater degree than in previous assignments, students are the experts. Only the writer has seen the neighborhood as he or she has seen it; this vision is unique. We can tell the writer that the vision of the neighborhood does not get through to us; we should not tell the writer that the vision of the neighborhood is inadequate or wrong.

At this point, the student has the writing process under control (list-making, organization, selection of point of view, draft writing) and has solved the problems encountered in descriptive and narrative writing. Subsequent assignments will introduce conceptual problems that will muddy the water. A student who can organize a descriptive paragraph may not be able to organize a dispassionate analysis of motive. We have charter the course to the limits of our ability; from this point on, the

teacher in the classroom is the captain and navigator.

Assignment 7: "Explain how to do something."

This assignment is the first of three 'explanation' assignments. The wording of the assignment has been kept simple and highly non-specific to give the student freedom to choose a congenial subject.

The writer in this assignment has three basic problems to solve: 1) the writer must clarify the process for the writer (how do I do X?); 2) the writer decide how much the audience knows about the process; and 3) the writer must discover the best way to teach (explain, describe) this process to the chosen audience. It may be that in attempts to solve all these problems at once, the writer will produce a murky first and second draft, probably written from a you point of view (first you do this, then you do that). In this case, we found that asking the writer to write from an I point of view (first I do this, then I do that) clarified the process for the writer, thus enabling the writer to solve problems 2 and 3 above, audience and rhetorical strategy. Occasionally writers used both the I and the you: "First you spread newspaper on the working surface.... Then I spread the material I will paint on over the newspaper." This student has not decided whether to demonstrate the way he does something or to abstract from his own experience a process that could be replicated by another. We suggest that this student be allowed to choose between I or you, perhaps even writing the assignment both ways.

As with other assignments, the student should be writing about something he or she is an expert in. Only in this case will the student be able to write a specific and informative essay. "How to bake a cake" is a recipe

for disaster; "how to bake my special Christmas cake" has a chance of success. "How to fish" proved to be a dead end, whereas "How to catch small-mouth bass in Quabbin" was successful; "how to race stock cars" (a disaster) became "how to fix a car" (another disaster) which became "how to fix a dent in a fender" (qualified success).

Assignment 8: Explain how something works."

The focus in Assignment 8 is on how each part of a mechanism contributes to the working of the whole by indicating its proper relation to the other parts. Mechanism is used in a broad sense to indicate not only non-human or sub-human structures (watches, engines, kidnesy) but procedures in which human beings act in clearly defined ways (diving judges, football players).

This assignment may well require homework, and it will be important to predict a day or so in advance the student's progress to this assignment. One of our writers chose a piano, and she had to go home to find out how it worked; another chose a human heart, and had to return to his biology textbook. The student should be told before completing Assignment 7 to think of a topic for 8 and do the necessary homework.

Assignment 9: "Explain why you did something or why you do something. What you did, or do, should be something that sticks in in your mind, bothers you, is somehow important to you."

The original assignment read as follows:

"Explain how or why you did something or how or why something happened to you." This wording produced instant problems, for in asking the writers to "explain how," we were asking students to return to Assignment 4, "Tell us about something that happened to you." We decided that

we wanted the writers to work with their motives for doing something, describing, in effect, a chain of cause and effect or perhaps describing a number of motives and giving them a definite priority. We decided to eliminate the how from the assignment and to keep the why. We chose to write both did and do to leave open the possibility of the single action (A Separate Peace, or why I tried to kill my brother) and of habitual action (why I lift weights, why I smoke, why I drink so often and so much).

A problem: the student may select a trivial subject. This problem is always with us, but since this assignment requires some self-examination, and since self-examination is for most of us something that we undertake with some reluctance, we may find students attempting to avoid the required self-examination by selecting the unimportant subject (why I'm in summer school). We can only be aware of the problem and deal with it as it appears.

Assignment 10: "Select a picture from Stop, Look and Write. What do you see? What do you think about what you see?"

Assignment 11: "Select a passage from the booklet and read it through. What have you read? What do you think about what you have read?"

These assignments have given us more trouble than the others. Specifically, we found that we did not know what we meant by interpretation, which was the category in which we fit these two assignments. We thought we knew, but when we were faced with student essays, we found it difficult, and ultimately undesireable, to define a proper response. We did not want to send the writers off on a hunt for "meaning." Further, some pictures and prose passages lent themselves to "interpretation" more readily than others.

Some students absolutely refused to interpret some pictures, saying in one form or another "a rose is a rose is a rose" or "a poem should not mean, but be." Still further, the act of interpreting pictures or passages seems to demand a degree of expertise not possessed by many of the tenth grade students we worked with this summer. A college English major soon learns to interpret prose and poetry, but this is a skill to be acquired. If someone can interpret a painting or a dream, then that person has a definable skill. Students are interpreting all the time, but in their own fields of expertise--interpreting facial expressions, dress styles, sounds made by a car engine. But the interpretation of a photograph, a piece of prose or poetry--should we expect them to be able to perform adequately? And if not, should we teach the interpretation of photographs or of literature as a separate skill?

We decided that the writing laboratory/workshop was not the place to teach the skills of pictorial or literary interpretation in any formal way. We found that we could help many students work through individual interpretations, but that to insist upon interpretation was not productive. We more positively decided to let the picture or prose passage act primarily as a stimulus for writing, rather than primarily as the subject for writing, and adopt generally a supportive attitude toward the specific character of the student's response. We would allow the students to interpret, take off from, imagine--and we would act as editors, refining the writing as it began to appear. We would insist, however, that the student's writing meet three specific criteria: that the student move from the literal or specific to the abstract; that the student make this leap in a responsible manner; and that whatever the essential character of the writing (interpretation,

fantasy, fiction) this product should be as good (internally consistent, coherent, et. al.) as possible.

To our discussions of these two writing assignments, we came to general agreement on two positions. First, we feel that English teachers and departments all too readily teach the interpretation of literature, a skill that is not trivial, certainly, but not of such moment that its teaching should dominate an English basic skills curriculum. Second, we feel that in a course whose main purpose is to create independent and competent writers, writing about writing should have a minor role.

From the above, it should be clear that in Assignments 10 and 11, we feel that students should be encouraged to interpret (seek the meaning of) but that the primary objective of this set of assignments is to encourage the production of the greatest possible quantity of good writing, and not to train our students in the interpretation of works of art. In short, if in working through these two assignments learning how to interpret begins to get in the way, forget interpretation and press on.

Assignment 10: "Select a picture from Stop, Look and Write. What do you see? What do you think about what you see?"

As the assignment is presently worded, a student may select any picture from Stop, Look, and Write. This freedom of choice presents two problems for the teacher in the writing workshop: first, the student may choose a picture that does not lend itself to interpretation (the horse in the library); and second, the teacher may be faced with a class that is writing on twenty different pictures. If this happens, the teacher will have difficulty deciding rapidly enough whether a given interpretation is responsible or not. Furthermore, the pictures in Stop, Look, and Write are surrounded by text--questions, exercises and the like which may lead the

student to a particular interpretation. In several cases, our writers almost cribbed their interpretations from the text on the facing page. (see S. L. & W., p. 111)

To save ourselves and our students from certain failure, we selected fifteen pictures from SLW. These pictures are found on the following pages: 20, 27, 31, 42, 50, 55, 64, 74, 77, 111, 112, 119, 143, 177, 192. We encourage teachers to make their own selections and to make their lists shorter than ours.

We found that students could profitably repeat this assignment. Once they had completed a successful interpretation, they seemed to enjoy choosing a second picture and writing another interpretive essay. The second went faster than the first, and was generally superior.

Assignment 11: "Select a passage from the booklet and read it through. What have you read? What do you think about what you have read?"

Much of what we have said of Assignment 10 applies here as well. To repeat, we do not feel that we should be teaching the interpretation of literature. If students have trouble finding meaning in the passages, we suggest that the teacher bring in a passage that will act as a stimulus for writing a provocative passage that will be a goal to thought, rather than a passage that will be the object of thought.

Assignment 12: "Persuade someone to agree with what you think about something."

We did not fully test this assignment in our summer workshop. It was the last in the sequence, and only one-third of the class completed it. We offer our comments on this section with the full knowledge that they

are really a beginning and not a conclusion, simply the chatter which might, with time and further experience, become useful statement.

Some students found subjects and began writing quickly. Others blocked for thirty minutes or more, apparently unable to find a subject. We guess that the "blocking" has its cause in the word persuade and the essentially combative situation the student might be in, doing battle with a hostile audience.

For the "blocked" student, we altered the assignment, making it read "Tell us what you think about X." We provided a list of possible X's: busing, rain, cheerleaders, and so on. In the case of one frustrated student, this worked.

The words persuade and opinion seemed to confuse and frustrate many students. We had several who said they had no opinions, and they said this honestly and without rancor. We know that they do have opinions. We surmise that the word opinion has meaning to us but not to some of them. "Tell us what you think" produces opinions; "State an opinion" often does not.

In this assignment, more than in others, the teacher has to help many students discover their subjects: Some strategies that worked:

1. After the student blocks on "persuade..."give him or her the "Tell us what you think about X" assignment, as described above.
2. Look at the interest sheets and at completed writing for latent or expressed opinions.
3. Present the student with a moral dilemma, and ask "who is right?"
4. Present the student with a provocative thesis, and have the student support or demolish it.